

A Life in the Archives: An Interview with Professor Nick Deocampo

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Figure 1: Nick Deocampo

In March 2020, Professor Dina Iordanova asked me to contribute to a dossier on Asian film archival practices, suggesting that I interview Professor Nick Deocampo, who teaches at the University of the Philippines Film Institute and is one of the region's leading film historians. Professor Deocampo has contributed to the discovery and restoration of many films pertaining to the Philippines and its history. His extensive research and scholarship on the history of Filipino cinema has resulted in rich and fascinating accounts of the country's cinematic past, despite the loss of many films made there. He also has a career as a documentary filmmaker and has made acclaimed films such as *Children of the Regime* (1985) and *Revolutions Happen Like Refrains in a Song* (1987), among others. Professor Deocampo has been involved with organisations and projects such as the Southeast Asia-Pacific Audiovisual Archive Association (SEAPAVAA) and UNESCO's Memory of the World (MoW) project, and has contributed to the preservation of the Philippine documentary heritage and Filipino culture.

His journeys as a scholar have enabled him to build a personal archival collection from the materials he has sourced from visits to institutions all over the world. His research has resulted in publications such as: *Eiga: Cinema in the Philippines during World War II* (Anvil, 2016), *Cine: Spanish Influences on Early Cinema in the Philippines* (National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 2003), and *Film: American Influences on Philippine Cinema* (Anvil, 2011) that engage with the historical relevance of Filipino cinema and the colonial legacies of Philippine film history; and the edited collections *Lost Films of Asia* (Anvil, 2006) and *Early Cinema in Asia* (Indiana University Press, 2017),

which elucidate on the precarious state of films and film heritage today, and the historical beginnings of cinema in the Asian continent respectively.

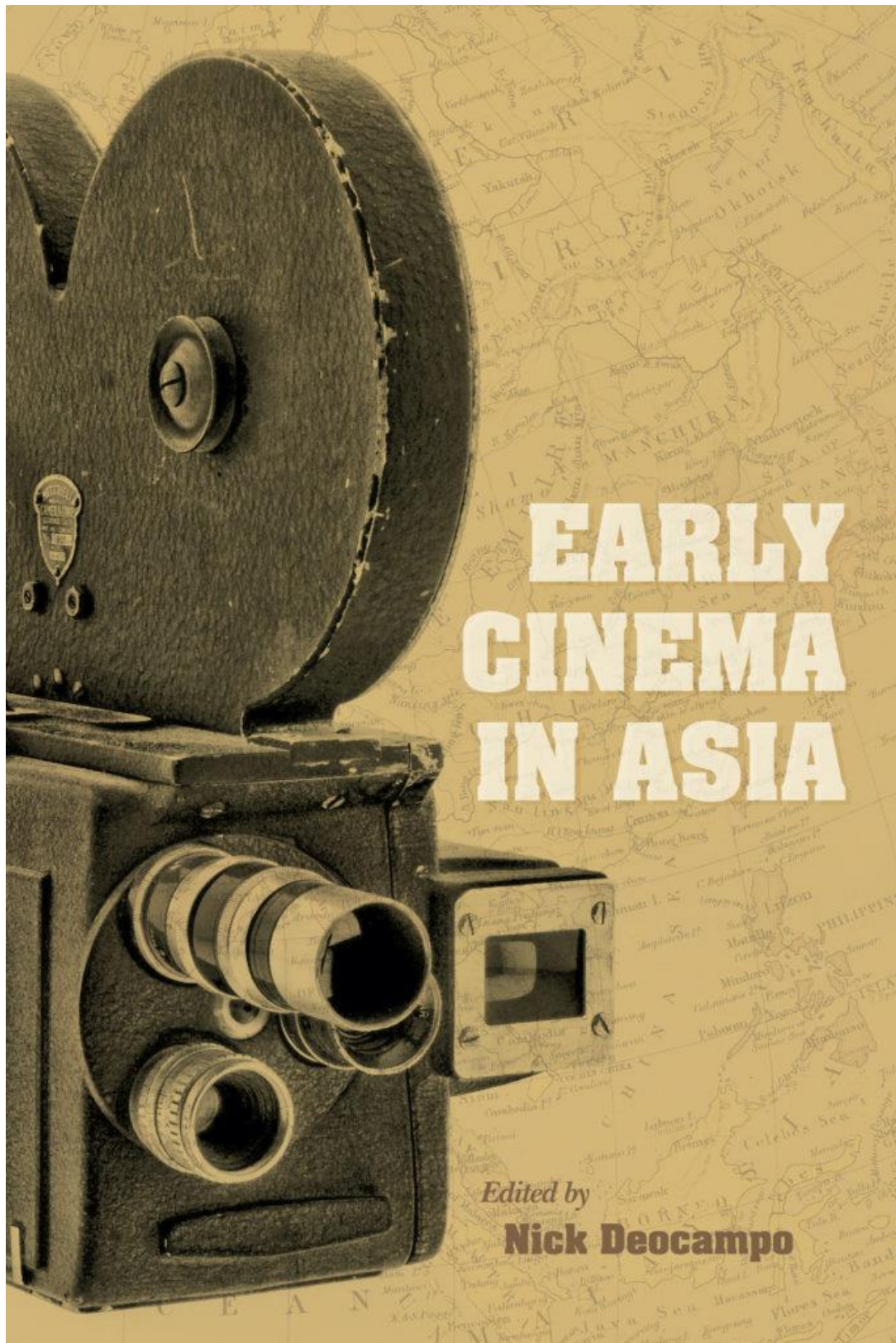


Figure 2: Cover of *Early Cinema in Asia* (Indiana Univ Press, 2017)

The interview was an opportunity for Professor Deocampo to recount some of his experiences in archive and restoration work, and discuss his engagement with the institutions he has worked with to promote preservation. It was also a chance to learn about issues within Filipino film historiography and his efforts to promote film literacy in the country.

Anushrut Ramakrishnan Agrwaal (ARA): Could you give us an overview of your journey as researcher? You can begin with your educational background and tell us how you became interested in film history, archiving, and preservation.

ND: I did my Master of Arts in Cinema Studies at New York University (1988-1989) as a Fulbright scholar. For my undergraduate course, I earned a Bachelor's in Theatre Arts at the University of the Philippines (1976-1981). To support myself in college, I worked in the library as student assistant. Although I was already a regular library user since primary school, I was introduced to library systems with this job. Filing books and finding documents became part of my skills, and my familiarity with the library turned into a fondness for printed materials and documents as repositories of knowledge.

When I went to graduate school I lived right across the NYU's Bobst Library in Washington Square Park. I developed a routine of making a daily visit to the library as if I were going to an office. With so much time on my hands, I filled up reams of paper and notebooks with handwritten notes and direct copies of what I read (instead of photocopying, to save on precious dollars). I mainly copied materials about cinema, especially texts that mentioned the cinema of the Philippines. I still have those handwritten research notes.

The faculty at NYU shaped my subsequent interests. These were people who I already knew from their books and articles. Meeting them and attending their lectures – just sitting in front of them – were some of the most intellectually fulfilling experiences of my life. I loved attending the lectures of Annette Michelson, Robert Stam, and Robert Sklar, in particular. The three influenced my scholarship a great deal and particularly my work as a film historian.

Prof. Michelson had the most profound influence on me, despite her notorious reputation for terrorising her students. But not me! I got three straight A's from her. Quite an achievement, I was told by an unbelieving department. Prof. Sklar had the most visible impact on my scholarly work. The two classes I took under him were Film Historiography and New German Cinema – both of which taught me the discipline of thinking historically.

While in New York City, I saved up for a trip to Washington DC where I could do research at the Library of Congress. During school breaks I took the train to make a pilgrimage to the Library where a new chapter in my life began at the Motion Pictures reading room. That's where I busied myself in frenetic research, as I could only afford to stay in DC for three days.

It was at the Library of Congress where my interest in archiving was seriously ignited. The Library has holdings of the oldest of records. They have old film fragments, rare books and photographs, and ephemera of all sorts. It was a holy experience to be able to see extant copies of the first films the world has ever known, the records kept by their inventors, or the original catalogues they were

listed in. The library collection led me to appreciate film as documentary heritage. Seeing how much film heritage the world has lost, and my being in front of rare documents, made my mind wander to the many documents that were lost, or missing or destroyed.

Later on, in 2002, I applied for an International Senior Research Fellowship Grant from Fulbright so I could spend a month undertaking research of the Philippines' film history at the Library of Congress. Because there really was no category in the library collection on that subject I had to pour myself into volumes of books and printed materials in order to cull out any piece of information that I could find regarding my topic. It was like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. The data I was able to bring home formed the basis of my personal archive. I finished my thickest book, of 700 pages (*Film: American Influences on Philippine Cinema*, 2011), based on the documents I gathered mainly from the Washington DC library. I also digitised part of the documents with the hope of donating them one day to a research library that I would like to set up at the University of the Philippines.

These are the experiences that influenced my writing and researching. Slowly I gained the attention of professional organisations, not only of those interested in film but also those in the areas of archiving and library studies. I began to realise there was room for film in the related professions, too. Starting in 2006, I was invited to become involved with professional organisations, among them UNESCO's Memory of the World (MoW) Committee and the Southeast Asia-Pacific Audiovisual Archive Association (SEAPAVAA). For those who were interested in keeping, preserving, restoring and promoting anything of value there was room for cinema on the table, including film.

As a member of both SEAPAVAA and UNESCO-MoW, I started creating professional networks that allowed me to visit other film archives, libraries and museums in places such as Canberra, Ha Noi, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Shanghai, Jakarta, Cebu, and Singapore. In those travels, I joined archivists who worked in Manila's archives (then the only official film archive), ABS CBN Film Archive, and the government archives that had film collections, such as the National Archives, the Philippine Information Agency, and the Cultural Center of the Philippines (although I was not an archivist professionally). The film school I headed then, the Mowelfund Film Institute located in Metro Manila, had its modest film archive. It kept an orphaned film collection of Super 8mm and 16mm films – products from twenty-four years of film workshops that I had organised for the school. In all these travels and professional engagements, my interest in film and its history widened to cover areas that are essential to cinema's preservation. This, in turn, led me into the world of archiving and the related fields of libraries and museums.

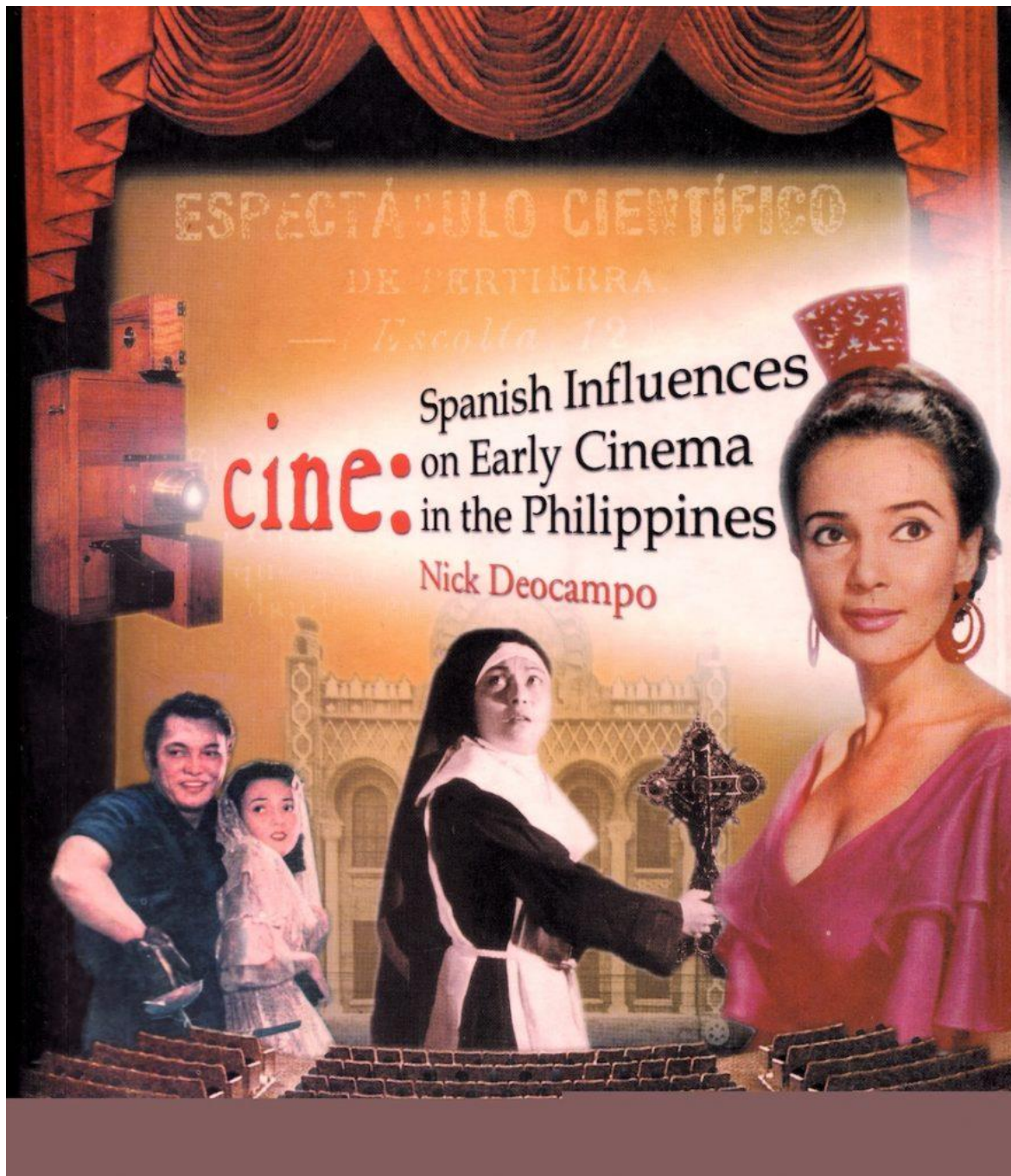


Figure 3: Cover of *Cine Spanish Influences on Early Cinema in the Philippines*, (National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 2003)

ARA: This is a fascinating journey! Could I ask you how these experiences influence your teaching now?

ND: The influence is in my appreciation of archival research and its role in knowledge production. My pedagogy is grounded in research. This is shared with my students in all classes, be they in film history, in political economy, in documentary, in experimental cinema, as well as in thesis supervision. Archive-based research plays an integral part in my lecturing and writing. If I make a difference as a historian (compared to those a generation ago in the Philippines) it is because the knowledge I produce is archive-derived and backed by solid factual research in libraries and

museums. This base is seen in the bibliographic data, in the end notes and appendices at the back of my books. I expect to find the same meticulous referencing in my students' theses.

ARA: Since your work focuses on research and discovery, could you tell us about your engagement with the process of discovering and restoring Filipino films?

ND: As I mentioned earlier, I made a research trip to the United States in 2002 as a Senior Research Fulbright Fellow. It was toward the end of my stay that my attention was caught by a film that had arrived from Finland. Nobody could identify the nationality of the film, so I was asked if I would care to take a look and see if I could identify the film's country of origin.

A few minutes into the film I did something that was not allowed at the Library. I screamed! And everyone rushed towards me to check if I was ok. Nothing was wrong except that I found a major Filipino film classic that had been believed lost for more than half a century. It was sixty-five years since *Zamboanga* (Eduardo de Castro, 1937) was "lost" and now it was found. All these years the copy had been in possession of a movie exhibitor in Finland who decided to donate his print to the Finnish film archive, which in turn sent a copy to the Library of Congress in 2002 (the year I was doing my research grant at the Library of Congress). I was screaming with joy! A lost classic was found. The next thing I did was to go to Dr. Patrick Loughney, the Library Director. Given the limited time I had I begged him for a copy of the film. He promised that I would get a print, but no print was ready for me before my departure for Manila. However, his promise was good enough for me. In less than a year, Dr. Loughney flew to Manila to deliver the copy himself during a film festival that I had organised. A crisp copy of the film was donated to the growing collection of the film school I headed, Mowelfund Film Institute, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Finding *Zamboanga* was the turning point of my journey in film archiving. My experience was further enriched when I visited Tampere, Finland, in 2013 as a jury member for a film festival, where I got to meet the people who had been in charge of preserving and sending the film to the Library of Congress. I found out the print had been kept in the Finnish Film Archive, and they had decided to deposit a print at the Library of Congress as they were aware that the film's producers were two Americans, Edward Tait and George Harris. Although the film was shot in the Philippines it was believed to be an American production (the Philippines was still a US colony at the time of the film's making in 1937).

I interviewed them and found out the story of how the film produced in the Philippines ended up in such a far-away, cold country. The experience taught me another thing which I could not learn formally but only through personal contact with people. I learned about "context". This means knowing the background of a thing or a phenomenon, learning how something came to be and how it has become what it is. In the case of *Zamboanga*, I learned the history of its exhibition and reception as it travelled from the Philippines to the United States, and to Finland and all other places in between, until it was returned to the United States. My interest in archiving now fitted closely with my passion in film history.

Zamboanga's discovery made me want to find more films and carry out more archival research, retrieval, and preservation. Fortunately, *Zamboanga* was only the beginning of my discovery and

retrieval of Filipino films. I have since had other experiences. In Bangkok I visited the film archive set up by the much-respected Dome Sukvong in Putthamunton, just outside Bangkok city. There, Dome gifted me with a 16mm print and U-matic copies of two Filipino films classics from the 1950s.

One was *Darna* (Fernando Poe, 1951), a comics-inspired film that is like the Wonder Woman character we know today. The film is about the lead character, Darna, who is able to fly and fight against a Medusa-like character with snakes for hair. This was a 1951 film that started a whole series of sequels in the Philippines. The copy given to me was from the original version that was lost along with other film gems, due to decades of neglect and the lack of an archive specialising in film preservation. I was surprised a copy was in the Bangkok archive. When I asked Dome how that had happened, the plot thickened. A copy of the film was found in Cambodia where it is claimed that the country's film industry started making films with a similar Medusa-like character after the Filipino film was shown on their local screens!

The other lost classic that was given to me by Dome was *Dyesebel* (Gerardo de Leon, 1953), which is about a mermaid who suffers from society's prejudices especially after she falls in love with a man. The copy, if I remember right, had been found at a Buddhist monastery! Now that was quite a story. What would a film with many bare-breasted mermaids be doing in a monastery?

Both films were of commercial value, and they had such wide popular reputation that they are considered classics of the 1950s. This era is also designated as the golden age of Tagalog cinema. If not for Dome's remarkable archival work these films would have been consigned to oblivion.

Another film that is hard for me to forget because of the story of its discovery is *Badlis sa Kinabuhì* (*Destined by Fate*, Leroy Salvador, 1969). The reason why it is important for me is because it was the only Cebuano-language film available outside of Tagalog-speaking Manila, where most of the Filipino films were produced, when it was found in the 1990s. Therefore, the film was a rare find. It also had a pedigree because it had been the country's entry to the Berlin Film Festival in 1969. Plus, it had won a lot of local awards despite its being a non-Tagalog film, which was rare.

There was no money forthcoming when I approached the country's cultural ministry to fund its preservation. The film was not considered a "priority". It was little known as a film that came from outside the film capital and had lower "value" than the renowned works of Lino Brocka whose films no doubt deserved being preserved. However, I was flabbergasted at the decision of preserving newer works. Brocka's restorations could easily get funding from somewhere else. It took years until Australia's National Film and Sound Archive lent a hand to preserve *Badlis*. When it did, I was dismayed to find that the sound negatives had been the first to melt after all those years that had gone by.

What a great irony. Why? The film was rare mainly because of the Cebuano language spoken in it. It was important to preserve the film, as it was a rare find coming from Cebu. Cebu was a place where filmmaking had flourished vis-à-vis film development in Manila. Its history as the country's "other" film producing centre has all but been forgotten. I was able to write the only historical account of cinema from the region based on my research. The monograph is titled *Films from a*

“Lost” Cinema: A Brief History of Cebuano Films. I hope to turn it into a book from its present monograph form one day.

Presently, I keep a list of more than 150 titles of films about the Philippines. These titles are about my country, and mainly being documentaries made between the 1920s and 1980s, so much history can be found in them. The majority of these titles are not to be found physically in the country. They need to be retrieved and reintegrated to become part of the Filipino historical memory. At the moment, they are scattered around the world in archives and film libraries. It remains to be seen if one day they will find their way home.

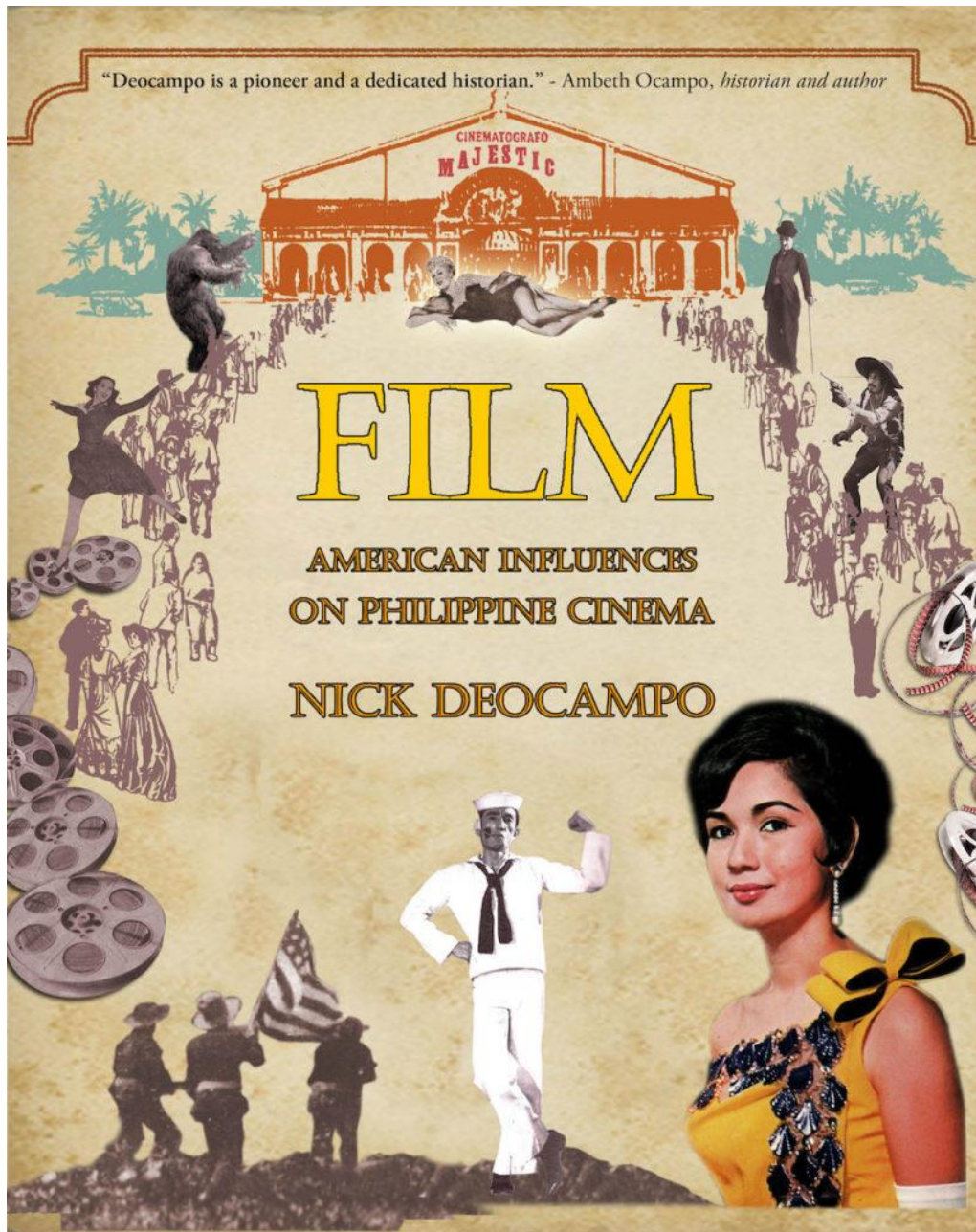


Figure 4: Cover of *Film American Influences on Philippines Cinema* (Anvil Publishing, Inc, 2011)

ARA: You speak about the “otherness” of Cebuano cinema. Could you tell me a little more about the tension between Tagalog and Cebuano language cinema? How does this complicate the notion of “national cinema” in Philippines?

ND: My “discovery” of Cebuano cinema and my eventual writing of its preliminary history have truly complicated the notion of what constitutes “national cinema” in the Philippines. For a century, we were all made to believe there was only a Tagalog or Manila-based cinema that later became the national cinema of the Philippines. No other counter-narratives could be found that made mention of Cebuano cinema, which obviously got side-lined in the writing of the national film history because of being a form of cinema made outside the film capital.

As someone who grew up in the south of the country on an island that belongs to the same linguistic group as Cebu (I grew up in Iloilo on the island of Panay, where my family originates from, although I myself was born in Manila), I had the necessary cultural background to research the subject. I also gave lectures in Cebu as part of the island-lecture tours I did for the film festivals that I organised in the nineties. On these trips, I always took time to do research at the libraries in Cebu city. A few visits and I had the data I needed to frame a historical account of a cinema that had vanished materially, with 35mm film prints having decayed as there was no one to preserve them. Despite some major historians residing on the island of Cebu, very few had touched on the subject of cinema. Besides, the documents I found while researching were in a language that not many young historians are familiar with: Spanish. Since my knowledge of Spanish is enough to help me read documents written in the language, coupled with my familiarity with the Cebuano language and also my interest in film history, I was in a good position to read these documents and translate them into historical film narratives.

My work on the “lost” history of Cebuano cinema, if I can say so myself, is an important milestone in the Philippines film history. However, this has been ignored by many Manila colleagues, as it complicated the more established historical narrative that has taken root in the public’s mind. For over a century, there has been little talk of any other cinema but Tagalog cinema. It is *the* “national cinema”. It will continue to be a long struggle for me to assert in the history of this “national cinema” the existence of a cinema that challenges its hegemony. It will still be a hard battle to change the film canons that have already been written about in books.

This is essentially a playing out of Manila’s imperial condescension to the cultures outside of its anointed capital domain. The prevailing dictum is: nothing rivals Manila’s supremacy. No one dares to challenge this “truth” in the case of cinema. But with the irrefutable facts produced through my research, a new truth is out to challenge the dogma. My research into this regional cinema will definitely rewrite the definition of what Filipino cinema is. It will challenge the construction of the national filmic imaginary by elucidating on a film culture that developed outside the country’s film capital. How the history of Cebuano cinema has been excised from historical memory, left in genocidal oblivion by film scholars, remains to me incomprehensible and unforgivable!

The impact of my writing about the history of this other cinema has great significance in the construction of what constitutes the national cinema of the Philippines. In these writings, the myth

of the Tagalog cinema as the lone, unchallenged national cinema is broken. The factual existence of Cebuano cinema, once considered lost and now found, will rewrite that national film history – especially because in my research I have discovered a very significant historical datum. This fact irrefutably establishes that the first film that was shot by a local Filipino filmmaker, Jose Nepomuceno, was filmed in Cebu, before he continued making films in his native Manila. The film was an unnamed newsreel shown in Cebu’s movie theatres to paid audiences in 1918. This was a year earlier than the reputed making of Nepomuceno’s first fiction film: *Dalagang Bukid* (*Country Maiden*, 1919), considered to be the country’s first native-produced film. The bias of film historians has asserted Nepomuceno’s first fiction film to be the first Filipino film ever produced which has put the history of Philippine cinema at an erroneous start.

Nepomuceno first filmed in Cebu. He made a newsreel. These are irrefutable facts. Just because what Nepomuceno shot was a newsreel does not mean it was not a motion picture. As a result, I have discovered that cinema started in the Philippines a year earlier than what was commonly believed. In short, if only for the fact that the first native-produced film was shot in Cebu, and not in Manila, then Cebuano film history has to be an essential part of the discourse of the history of motion pictures in the Philippines.

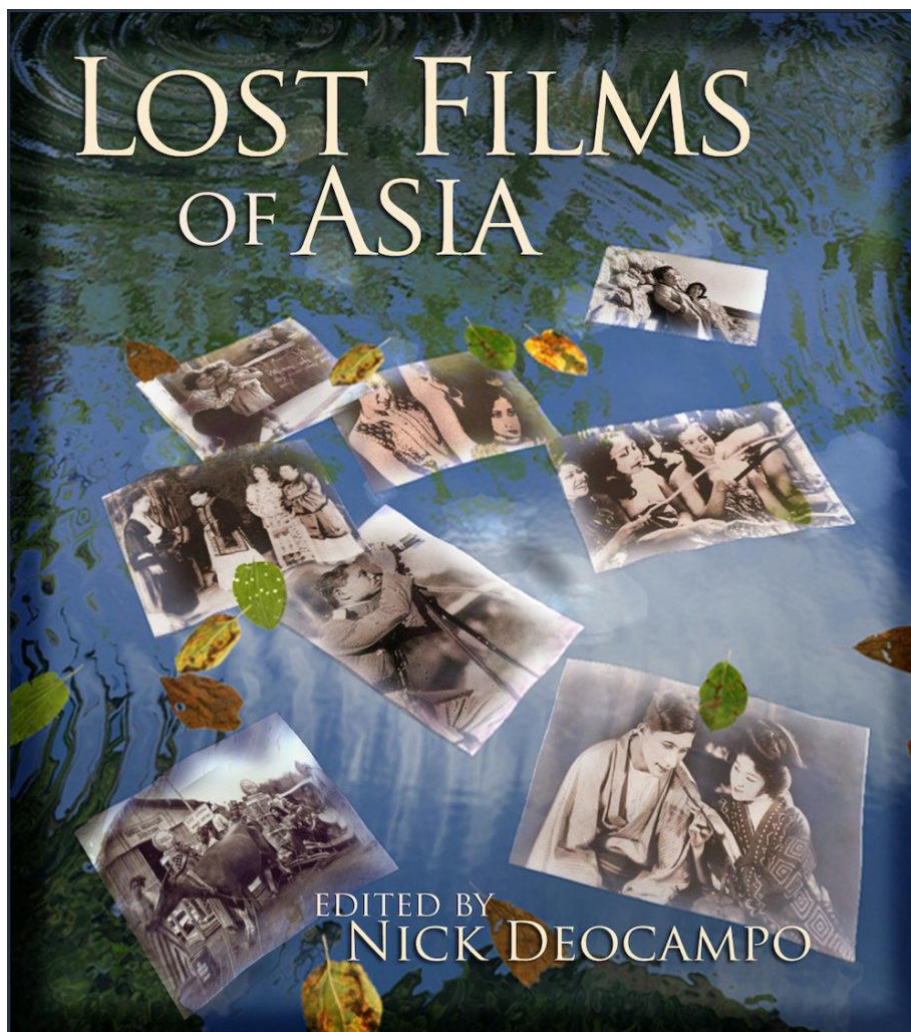


Figure 5: Cover of *Lost Films of Asia*, (Anvil Publishing Inc., 2006)

ARA: It sounds like your work on Cebuano cinema is absolutely essential. Speaking about popular perception, what is the status of film and archival literacy in the Philippines today? Could you speak about how literacy has evolved over the years of your involvement?

ND: There is no study regarding the status of both film and archival literacy in the Philippines. For a country that professes its love for film, there has been no way of knowing how much informed knowledge accompanies that love for film. Even in schools, film literacy is close to being unheard of. Sadly, this is also true among college students. Perhaps it may only be among those studying film that one may say there is film literacy, but generally no efforts have been made to widen the public's knowledge of film. The public knows film as entertainment only, and their appreciation ends there. Much less can be said about archival literacy. Again, literacy may only happen among those specialising in archival and libraries or information studies, but the general public has to be made more aware of it. This lack of knowledge about film and archives has made our work as academics, filmmakers, and archivists – and in cultural agencies like UNESCO, too – truly difficult. In my personal capacity as an advocate of documentary heritage preservation, and as a professional working in the academe and with NGOs, I have organised conferences, seminars and film festivals, if only to make people aware of the significance of film as culture and as heritage.

Among the events that I have organised recently are festivals such as the UP Film Institute Experimental Film Festival. This was to raise awareness about the most marginalised of all film forms: experimental film. Part of the event was to raise awareness on how to preserve the most endangered of our experimental film heritage, that goes a long way back to the 1950s. A good number of these films have already disappeared. There was also the International Pink Film Festival that supported LGBTQ films that lacked any decent appreciation before the festival in 2004. In terms of raising literacy about LGBTQ films, I am confident I have made some headway. But in terms of archiving the films, we have a long way to go.

I have also helped organise student film festivals and short film competitions to promote work coming from the islands and across the archipelago. In one way or another I know that my more than four decades of advocating for alternative film forms, like short films, documentaries, experimental, LGBTQ, women's films, animation, etc., have helped widen the appreciation of these alternative film forms.

In addition to these festivals, I am in the process of producing a ten-hour series of films that makes use of archival footage and 3D animation to recreate Philippine film history. The films are based on the film history books I have written. Visualising the historical narrative of how motion pictures developed in the Philippines, I have produced several episodes that brought to life different periods, from cinema's colonial past to its national present.

I have also organised a number of conferences and workshops to highlight film and archival consciousness, such as The UNESCO Asia-Pacific Documentary Heritage Conference, held in October 2018, and The Philippine Documentary Heritage Workshop, a one-day workshop held in November 2019 on how to nominate documents to the national, regional and international registries for the UNESCO-MoW projects.



Figure 6: Still from *Revolutions Happen like Refrains in a Song* (1987)

ARA: You spoke about organising student film festivals. Could you elucidate further on how you involve students and perhaps even local populations to consolidate the legacy of your work, and not let it rest on your efforts alone?

ND: In many lectures and workshops for promoting film literacy, I saw the participation of students, faculty, and personnel from libraries, archives, and museums. The workshops taught them how to put together proposals in order to nominate documents to UNESCO. Occasionally, I was able to invite technical experts to teach how to preserve films through digitisation and practical preservation techniques. How many of them will follow my lead? Only time will tell.

If only people knew how much work goes into organising international workshops, seminars, and film festivals. It takes months to apply for funding, and even when it goes through, you need to advance your personal money because some grants (especially the local ones) can only reimburse your expenses. Also, many of the staff I work with are students who need to be trained; many times you end up doing what you expected them to do. Through the years I have trained a lot of them. Many times they have become my stiff rivals for funds. If they make it and I don't, I may sound happy for them but there can sometimes be a bitter regret inside me. I have trained them so well that I have actually developed my own competitors for the limited funds available! But who am I to feel bad when one sees that the tribe has grown? What is sad though is that very few, very, very few, take up the challenge to organise film preservation or documentary literacy programmes.

ARA: Film literacy is crucial and often not given enough attention. One aspect is paying attention to film paratexts. In your writings you often stress the importance of secondary materials that contextualise and inform us about films – even those films that may be lost – in the effort to reconstruct cinema’s history. What types of such material have you worked with in your research?

ND: Now here’s a difficult question. When faced with the absence of documents (in this case film) and when one stares at an empty film archive, how could one write about history or anything at all to fill up the loss of films? Or, indeed, about films that have been restored and digitised? I have resorted to the use of published interviews, advertisements, reviews, playbills, notes in catalogues, magazine article, sand other similar sources of information in order to fill in information about lost films or about restored films that were made decades ago. In fact, in researching my book *Cine: Spanish Influences of Early Cinema in the Philippines* (NCCA, 2003) I relied to a great extent on “anuncios”, or the film’s publicity or announcements. The films I dealt with were produced a hundred years ago, from the 1900s until the end of WWII, by itinerant cameramen. The only traces of them are through paratextual materials. These came in the forms of movie advertisements or publicity about the films printed as advertisements in newspapers, posters, programmes, film criticisms, opinions, letters to the editor, editorials, autobiographical accounts, inventor’s notes, industry reports, trade journals, economic commodities reports, or even contemporaneous news reports, etc. I used them to recreate the period of the films I was discussing in my book and also to provide context for the films.

ARA: Tell us about your involvement in UNESCO-MoW? Further, since the UNESCO-MoW is particularly keen on preserving documentary heritage, what are the challenges facing the preservation of documentary cinema?

ND: My involvement with UNESCO-MoW started when I was invited to sit on the newly organised committee in 2006, to fill in the seat meant for the cinema sector. As you may know, the UNESCO-MoW recognises various documents for their heritage value, such as books, recorded sound, motion pictures, architectural designs, photographs, or anything that is a record of human achievements. Those who sit on the committee must come from sectors that represent those documents. Before this designation I was actively participating in events organised by the Southeast Asia-Pacific Audiovisual Archive Association (SEAPAVAA), and my contributions were getting noticed. As a member of the regional archival organisation, I have been invited to UNESCO-MoW conferences since the mid-2000s, and again my contributions were noticed.

For SEAPAVAA, I was commissioned to do a book called *Lost Films of Asia* (Anvil Publishing, 2006), the copies of which immediately sold out. Based on the success of that book, the regional UNESCO office in Bangkok commissioned me twice in 2008. Firstly, to present a regional training programme on cultural literacy, using MoW documents in the region as objects of study. And secondly, to put together a book on the regional MoW documents that were listed in their registries that would raise public awareness of the region’s documentary heritage. The MoW registries are lists that contain documents that were given international recognition for their outstanding values. The first project allowed me to do cultural literacy training in Singapore, Bangkok, and Jakarta in Asia, and later in Cebu, Baguio, Iloilo, Manila and Davao in the Philippines. The curriculum took

the examples of the ancient Thai syllabary, a Filipino film classic, and a piece of Malayan epic literature as codified texts for study. As to the second project, publishing a book containing the listed documents from the MoW registries, my UNESCO contract expired before funding could be secured to publish the book. The project was set aside. Several years later the book project was revived but a different set of people worked on it.

It was during my lecturing on cultural literacy using the region's documentary heritage that I developed a deep appreciation of the subject of documentary heritage. Documents, unlike monuments (which is another concern of UNESCO through its monuments and sites committee), are fragile and vulnerable to obsolescence, decay, theft, natural calamities, wars, lack of archives, no funding, and so on. The world has lost a lot of these documents, and what remains are endangered with natural and man-made destruction. As I continued to travel to various parts of Asia, I continued to be concerned by the region's (and indeed the world's) documents and what was going on to preserve them. But resources are scant, and the most one could do on the level of UNESCO was to be an advocate that would increase public consciousness about the documents that we need to preserve, combining this with doing something from a personal and institutional perspective so they could be preserved.

Giving prestige to outstanding documents is another way to increase public awareness. During my term as the Philippine member, and later chair, of the MoW national committee, I had three Philippine documents elevated to the international, regional, and national registries as accomplishments. But the actual initiative must be by the stakeholders of those documents to preserve and restore them. Policymaking was another avenue for us in UNESCO: asking governments to become aware of the need to preserve their valuable documents and coming up with policies to safeguard them and widen public awareness. I have done my share in the area of documentary heritage. After my term was over in 2019, I stepped down so that I could concentrate on my research and writing.

As to preserving documentary cinema, this too comes under the mandate of UNESCO-MoW, like all other documents. I did not give any special favour or attention to film's preservation just because I came from the cinema sector and was a filmmaker who specialises in documentaries. But I understand the concern that documentary films need special attention as not they are not as popular as mainstream films. Being away from public attention, documentaries need extra support for preservation and restoration. UNESCO-MoW committee counts many institutions that are experts in film preservation and restoration among its members, including the National Film and TV Archive of Australia and the Asian Film Archive. They have done their share of preserving documentary films.

In fact, I was one of the beneficiaries of this support. Shot on Super 8mm film, my documentary about the People's Power Revolution in Philippines that toppled the Marcos dictatorship, *Revolutions Happen Like Refrains in a Song* (1987), was preserved by a German video restoration group and later shown at the Winterthur film festival in Switzerland. The film is now kept at the Asian Film Archive in Singapore. Sadly, at present, there has not been a concerted effort in preserving and restoring documentary films. Being a documentary filmmaker myself, and given my passion for archiving, I would like to see a wide-scale preservation and restoration of documentaries in

Asia one day. As I have written in my new book, *Early Cinema in Asia* (Indiana University Press, 2017), Asia has one of the earliest roots in documentary filmmaking. Some of the earliest films which were progenitors of present-day documentaries were shot in Asia by itinerant cameramen, from the Lumiere Brothers cameramen all the way to Burton Holmes.

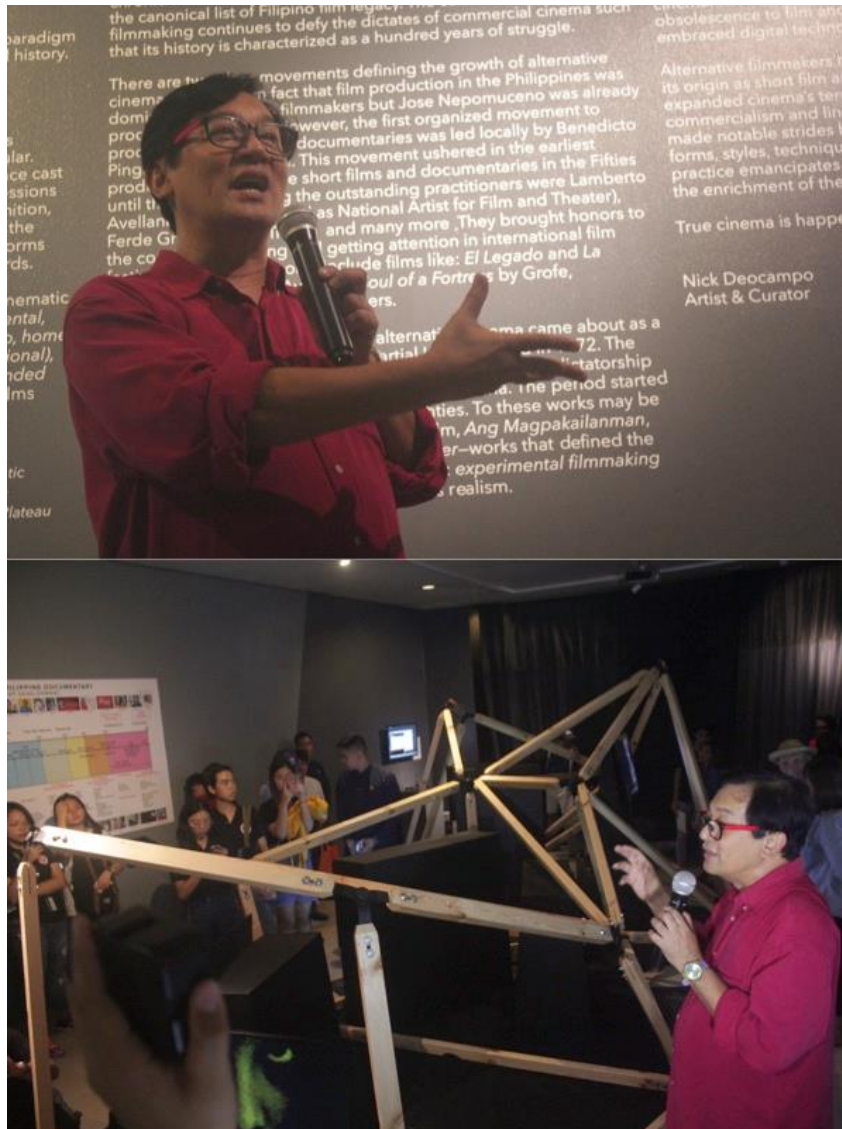


Figure 7: Nick Deocampo at the Ayala Exhibit

ARA: My final question: In what ways do you think film archives and film restoration are national ideas, and in what ways do you think they are international?

ND: It's pretty commonsensical to think that when an archive works for the interests of archiving and restoring documents of a nation it is "national". But when an archive keeps things whose original source is not local, but instead located elsewhere, then it must "international". However, many things fall in-between the cracks between these two spaces. Many films, like those made in co-production, have a provenance listing several countries (including its own place of production) as producers, so how does one consider its identity? Migration and cross-border travel bring along challenges to the rigid divisions of "national" and "international".

The UNESCO-MoW project has not been spared by such debates. For example, the Dutch East India Company – engaged in colonial trade spanning from Holland to its colony in what is now Indonesia (then Dutch East Indies), passing through India, Macau, Malacca, and many other sea ports – inscribed in their documents as well as their products the shifting identities of the goods they circulated. There have been controversies about whether certain documents from their vast holdings belonged to this or that country. Thailand and Cambodia, for example, fight bloody battles over who owns the right to a temple located in between their borders. Thankfully, none of that has happened with any documentary heritage. A serious study of the identity of documents is in order, which even if it does not resolve the “national”/“international” divide, adds more to our growing appreciation and knowledge of documents having a life and an identity of their own.

ARA: Just a follow-up on this, given the possible confusion about who an audio-visual document belongs to, do you think the country where a film finally ends up creates historical absences in other countries? What are the ways to deal with this, and are there ways that archives in Asia are dealing with this?

ND: With film (as an AV document), I guess there is less of a problem. Because of film’s reproducibility as a mechanical work made through technology, film can be owned either physically or materially by whoever wants to own it. Even a consumer can own it. This way, there cannot be a material “absence” of it from wherever it comes from. This is the advantage of works of mechanical derivation. There is no fixation with the original, as the work by its mere reproducibility has lost the original film’s aura of authenticity. This is unlike paintings and other art works that base their value in their originality. The problem with films lies in questions of proprietary ownership. This is when someone else makes fraudulent copies of someone else’s film and profits from such intellectual thievery. When such things happen then there is a loss in ownership more than an absence of the material product. This is of course what is popularly known as piracy. There have been systemic ways to deal with such an act.

But in cases where something shot on analogue celluloid ends up with its only print in somewhere other than where it was originally produced, solutions can be found. On the one hand, it can be disadvantageous to the original owner as the newfound location deprives the owner of a property they own. But the way this problem is solved diplomatically now is if the effort at repatriation of the original print will not work for some reason, then a copy can be struck in video format from the original and given to the rightful owner while the original print remains with the one who has the copy.

This is what happened to the two films I received from the Bangkok archive. In the original celluloid state that they were found in, *Darna* and *Dyesebel* could be seen as trophies for the archive that found them. It was not easy for the archive to then give away films that they thought were their priceless finds. Of course, because the copies of these film were in Bangkok, then Manila had certainly been deprived of them. Hence there had been an absence of these films for half a century in the Philippines. Now that they were found, the question arises: should these original prints be returned to Manila, where they originally belonged? Should I have insisted on repatriating them back to their home country?

There was no reason to do so. The original prints were in such a fragile state that it was insane to consider bringing them home. And without an archive to take care of those fragile prints, they would be bound to merely melt and disappear. So, to solve the problem of my going home with prints of the films in my luggage, I was happy enough to be given video copies of the films. Nothing was lost except that they came home in video form instead of celluloid.

About the Interviewee

Nick Deocampo is an Associate Professor at the Film Institute of the University of the Philippines. He took up his Master of Arts in Cinema Studies at New York University and received a Certificate in Film in Paris, France. Among his books are *Early Cinema in Asia*, *Eiga: Cinema in the Philippines during WWII* and *Lost Films of Asia*. His numerous published articles include “Envisioning a Rhizomatic Audio-Visual Archiving for the Future,” a paper he also delivered as keynote speaker in the SEAPAVAA conference held in Manila (2017). He received international academic honours as Scholar-in-Residence in New York University, Chancellor’s Most Distinguished Lecturer at the University of California, Irvine; and International Fellow at the University of Iowa. He was a recipient of research grants from organisations like The Japan Foundation and The Sumitomo Foundation. He was former chair of the UNESCO Philippines *Memory of the World* National Committee. His documentaries have won awards in international film festivals, and he served as a member of international/Asian film juries in the Teddy Awards (Berlin Film Festival), Busan, Yamagata, Oberhausen, Prague, Hawaii, Singapore, New Delhi, and numerous other festivals.

About the Interviewer

Anushrut Ramakrishnan Agrwaal is a doctoral student in Film Studies at the University of St Andrews. His current project is on the use of films for education during the Early Cinema period in Britain. He has previously worked on the cartographic subtext of the films made by the British Colonial Film Unit, and the defiance of Hegelian Historiography in African Film.